



Persistent short-term imprisonment: Belonging as a lens to understand its shifting meanings over the life course

Incarceration
2021, Vol. 2(1) 1–20
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DOI: 10.1177/2632666321989018
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Abstract

This article takes a life-course perspective to the meaning of persistent short-term imprisonment and introduces the significance of ‘penal careers’. Examining a total of 62 interviews with men and women in Scotland with long careers of (progression through) criminal punishment, it uses to the concept of belonging as a lens to interpret their experiences. While some participants already felt early on in their career that they belonged in prison because of their shared characteristics with other prisoners, the repetition of imprisonment meant that they increasingly felt displaced from life outside and saw life in prison as ‘easier’ and ‘safer’. Nevertheless, looking back on their many sentences, they felt their cumulative meaning was ‘a waste of life’. The article concludes by considering steps towards tackling the conditions that create this sense of belonging in a place of punishment.

Keywords

Penal careers, short-term imprisonment, belonging, lived experience, life course, meaning

This article focuses on the meaning of repeated short-term imprisonment¹ imposed on people usually labelled as ‘persistent offenders’. While often positioned as responsible for a disproportionate number of crimes (Hopkins and Wickson, 2013), this group is relatively invisible in the

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academic literature, often subsumed in overlapping but not identical groups such as ‘drug users’. Very little is known about their criminal justice experiences beyond interventions particularly tailored to ‘Prolific and Persistent Offenders’, which tend to rely on increased control (Wright, 2017). The *Lives Sentenced* research reported here applies a life-course perspective to the study of *penal careers*, rather than ‘criminal careers’, for the first time. Especially for those who are repeatedly imprisoned for short periods, it is the *accumulation* of sentences that is meaningful, rather than the impact of individual sentences. Participants often spoke of feeling more adapted or comfortable inside prison than out, where they felt they had little in place or available. Such implicit, as well as less frequent explicit, descriptions of a sense of belonging led to an analysis using this as a lens. This attention to belonging in time, place and space, applied over penal careers, offers an important new perspective that highlights the complicity of current penal practice in creating ‘revolving door’ prisoners. This article examines how meanings of persistent short prison sentences change over time and shape the lives of the punished, as well as how their lives outside in turn impact on the meaning of the sentence.

Until very recently, little was known about the meaning of sentences for those upon whom they are imposed. This was a peculiar oversight, as criminal punishment is at least in part aimed at changing behaviour, both in the short term (incapacitation in the case of prison and electronic monitoring) and the long term (rehabilitation and deterrence). Whether and how behaviour changes depend largely on how a sanction is perceived (Bouffard and Piquero, 2010; Sherman, 1993). A small literature has now developed around people’s perceptions of their sentences. However, this research has largely considered each sentence as one isolated penal event, rather than considering the accumulation of penal sanctions in people’s lives. One focus of the emerging literature is punitivity – the extent to which penal sanctions are experienced as punishment. Sexton (2015) found that the level of punitivity perceived by her US participants was affected by the salience (conditions being better or worse than expected) of their punishment. Indeed, two recent studies suggest that even relatively open penal regimes can still be experienced as painful and punitive because the confrontation of the prisoner with the loss of their freedom is less constant, and therefore more painful (Shammas, 2014). Van Ginneken and Hayes (2017) found significant disagreement among their participants in terms of whether prison or community penalties were more punitive and whether the deprivation of liberty inherent in imprisonment was the punishment or set the scene for further hard treatment. Notably, the link between crime and punishment does not seem to play a role in perceptions of punitiveness (Van Ginneken and Hayes, 2017). Research on the meaning of long-term imprisonment similarly found that prisoners’ perceptions of (the fairness of) the sentence was determined by the need for long-term prisoners to cope with their sentence, which generally encouraged acceptance rather than opposition (Schinkel, 2014a). Moreover, the need to tell a positive story about the future, in the absence of other resources, meant that some of the interviewees attributed a transformative power to their imprisonment (Schinkel, 2015).

Few studies have traced how the meaning of sentences might change over time as sentences accumulate. Wright (2017) has recently described the experiences of English women categorised as prolific or persistent offenders of different and accumulating criminal justice interventions. While repeated imprisonment had little impact, being subject to a prolific and other priority offending initiative made a return to offending *more* likely. Armstrong and Weaver (2013) found that prisoners’ anger towards the system increased as they spent longer in the system. This article integrates the study of accumulating experiences of punishment within a life-course perspective, thereby explaining why repeated short-term sentences are experienced differently from the same amount of time spent in prison on one long sentence.

The concept of belonging

As noted above, a recurrent theme in the interviews was the way in which the *Lives Sentenced* participants experienced prison as more comfortable than life outside, where expectations were different and life more unpredictable. A sense of belonging in prison was also occasionally mentioned explicitly, which lead to a search of the literature on belonging. The migration literature in particular had clear potential as a lens through which to examine the meaning of persistent imprisonment.

In sociology, belonging has been defined as ‘a sense of easy with oneself and one’s surroundings’ (May, 2011: 368), which gets very close to the sense of belonging as expressed in the interviews, as will be clear from the findings. This is similar to the Bourdieusian concept of ‘habitus’; knowing what to do, how and when in a particular context or social field (Bourdieu, 1977). This can be largely unconscious; one feature of belonging is that we do not have to pay attention to our navigation of our daily lives (May, 2011). Belonging is also spatial, where our regular navigation of the same places familiarises us with them and make them unremarkable (Leach, 2002).

Belonging has been especially closely examined in the migration literature, with emphasis generally placed on the political aspects of belonging, such as access to services and citizenship (Yuval-Davis, 2006). While these are relevant here, it is Antonsich’s (2010) work on the personal, affective dimension of belonging that is drawn on most extensively in this article. He writes that place-belongingness, the feeling of being ‘home’, is dependent on several factors. These are (1) autobiography (the making of memories in a place), (2) relationships that are stable, long-lasting, caring and in-person, (3) cultural factors such as a shared language and (4) legal factors, including the resources you have at your disposal to deal with the risks in the environment (Antonsich, 2010). These themes were especially evident in the *Lives Sentenced* data, and these dimensions will be discussed in more depth throughout. The political dimension, which examines belonging in terms of being immersed in a social context (Yuval-Davis, 2006), was largely absent from the data but can still be detected in the lives of the interview participants. Their very confinement to prison highlights their exclusion from life outside, with others holding the power to decide where they do and do not belong and imposing this exclusion for a certain length of time. Duff (2001) characterises imprisonment as a communication of temporary exclusion. This exclusion deprives prisoners of the markers of belonging in terms of their economic integration, participation in everyday social life and enjoyment of human rights, relative to their ‘outside’ lives (Antonsich, 2010). It has been noted that being forced to live in a certain place in itself disrupts a sense of belonging (Mceachern, 1998: 514).

The concept of belonging has much to offer to criminology, especially to those areas where identity has been used as an organising concept, such as in theories of desistance (Maruna, 2001; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). The advantage of the concept of belonging over identity is that it is inherently relational and mutually constituted, rather than ascribable to an individual (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Wright, 2015) and thereby allows us to see the impact of societal arrangements and criminal justice practices on the ways that individuals negotiate their lives.

Within criminology, Loader (2006) and McNeill (2016) have commented on belonging in ways that are relevant here. Loader (2006) highlights that the way in which communities are policed has implications for who feels that they belong there. He writes that policing ‘in a limited but profound way help[s] individuals to answer such questions as “Where do I belong?” “Who cares about me?” and, ultimately, “Who am I?”’ (Loader, 2006: 214). He also notes that it is often minorities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are excluded by policing strategies (see also Schinkel et al., 2019). McNeill’s conceptualisation of tertiary desistance² (or requalifying as a full member in the eyes of the wider community and having access to common goods) includes

Table 1. Number of participants by interview round and location.

	Location	Men	Women	Total	Total round
First round	Prison	13	12	25	37
	Community	9	3	12	
Second round	Prison	6	5	11	17
	Community	5	1	6	
Third round	Prison	4	3	7	9
	Community	2	—	2	

belonging. It refers ‘not just to shifts in behaviour or identity but to shifts in one’s sense of belonging to a (moral and political) community’ (McNeill, 2016: 201). While both these conceptualisations of belonging refer to its political dimension, they also include an affective component. Loader links a sense of belonging to a community to a feeling of being cared for and identity concerns, while McNeill’s discussion of the ‘sense of belonging’ links political belonging to individuals’ feelings and experiences of acceptance.

Methodology

The meaning of sentences must be examined *in context*, as sentences can only be understood subjectively and their meaning depends on prison conditions and prisoners’ wider lives (Schinkel, 2014a; Van Ginneken and Hayes, 2017). To do so, the *Lives Sentenced* research included life story interviews in 2014 with 37 people with experience of multiple penal sanctions, followed by further interview rounds in 2016 and 2018/2019, as depicted in Table 1.

All interview rounds were approved by the University of Glasgow Social Sciences Ethics committee as well as the Scottish Prison Service’s Research Access and Ethics committee. Recruitment took place within prison and in the community. One local prison, which holds both men and women, was able to accommodate the first research round. Men were recruited through a poster and word of mouth. On the women’s wing, there were fewer potential participants who met the initial recruitment criterion of having penal careers of at least 10 years, so this was changed to at least 5 years for women. With less access to communal areas for the women and myself, I relied on prison staff to identify potential participants and to approach them on my behalf. All participants were given a participant information sheet and signed a consent form before the start of each interview and were able to opt out after these were discussed.

In community settings, recruitment proved much more difficult, so different methods and contacts were used to boost participation. Table 2 presents how recruitment methods varied in different contexts, as well as the status of participants in relation to the criminal justice system.

My focus on the ‘persistently imprisoned’ meant that, by definition, their early sentences had been ineffective, at least in terms of stopping future offending. This should be taken into account when reading the findings that follow. Although early prison and community sentences did not serve to deter or rehabilitate these participants, this says nothing about the experiences of others excluded by my sampling criteria. Secondly, the women’s experiences were significantly different from the men’s. Often this was not (directly) due to their sex or gender identity, but to the fact that fewer women are imprisoned, that they are treated differently throughout the criminal justice system and that women more rarely experience ‘persistent imprisonment’ into their 30s. Finally, as

Table 2. Recruitment in the community.

Gatekeeper	Men	Women	Method	Status/time since last sentence
Residential centre	—	2	Through staff, initial meeting before interview	Alternative to custody
Hostel	2		Through staff	12–24 months
Charity providing activities	4		Presentation to wider group, those interested approached me	8 months to 10 years
Newspaper ad	1		Participant contacted me	On license post-release
Criminal Justice Social Work	1		Through staff	Under supervision
Agency providing 1-2-1 support		1	Through support worker	2 weeks
Big issue	1		Through leaflet	10+ years
Total	9	3		

I was asking participants to reflect on events often a long way back in the past, these retrospective accounts will have been affected by the passage of time and later events.

Participants had been convicted of a wide range of offences. Eight, including three women, had served a long-term sentence in the past, for attempted murder, burglary, an accumulation of driving offences and assault and robbery. At the other extreme, there were participants who had been convicted of a long string of minor offences, none of which had benefitted them in any way, such as breach of the peace. The most common offences were fighting and shoplifting, with people also frequently imprisoned for breach of the peace, driving offences and breaching their license or order.

After each interview, interested participants were sent a transcript of their interview and a life story, put together from this interview by arranging the material chronologically. The life story was also handed over in hard copy at the second interview, to give participants something of potential lasting value. For example, one interviewee said he would send the document to his son who was about to be adopted. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, and interviews lasted from 37 min to 131 min, with the vast majority between 1 h and 2 h. Often, the interview was curtailed by the prison regime, but in no case was this deemed sufficiently disruptive to arrange another interview.

The interview recordings were sent to a transcription service and I checked the transcripts in detail before importing them into NVivo. Both thematic and narrative analysis were carried out, the latter partly using the life stories. In the process of the analysis of the meaning of the sentences, it became quickly apparent that single sentences tended to mean little (or at least not have a negative meaning), but that their accumulation did. In the below, I use Antonisch's four-part typology of belonging as a framework to make sense of the meaning of this accumulation across the life course.

Findings

As the findings reported below are based on life story interviews, the discussion is ordered chronologically to preserve some of the narrative sweep of the stories told. Early sentence

meanings will be followed by accumulating and late sentence meanings and a subsequent discussion of more individual meanings within these journeys.

Pathways into persistent imprisonment – Disrupted belonging

The first important thing to note was that almost all participants had experienced (very) difficult childhoods, including poverty; bereavement; physical, emotional and sexual abuse; domestic violence; serious (car) accidents and being taken into care. For many, their sense of belonging was first disrupted at this early stage. Participants described a ‘catalogues of losses’ (Vaswani, 2015) including disrupted home lives, whether through family moves, violence within the home, divorce, moving between different caregivers or being taken into formal care. Such frequent moves tend to undermine any sense of belonging (Wilson and Milne, 2013) and stability (Vaswani, 2015). This often went along with school exclusion, which can both be seen as an outcome of a lack of belonging at school *and* a further disruption of a sense of belonging with their peers (Lee and Breen, 2007). It was very common to have turned to drugs, alcohol and offending to cope with these traumatic experiences or the boredom resulting from school exclusion. Most of the participants had received many community sentences before being imprisoned, although this was less true for the older participants whose penal careers had started in the 80s or early 90s. Community penalties were generally described as ‘chances’, although by definition these chances did not result in positive outcomes for this group, selected for their long penal careers. In these early years, interviewees reported that they were not motivated or able to stop offending, either because they still enjoyed the excitement and any financial benefits of offending (Katz, 1988) or because of addiction issues. Either way, the most common view was that the criminal justice system had been lenient at first, tolerating new offences as well as breaches, which only led to further community sentences.

I carried on shoplifting and I got like probation and things like that, community service, every alternative to the jail possible and it never worked and then eventually they said “there’s nothing else for it but prison”. (Michaela)

Michaela describes the point at which the patience of the system and the judge was worn thin, which varied from person to person. This was usually a point of no return after which very few ‘chances’ were on offer. Crucially, therefore, community sentences were ill-timed for this population.

The meaning of early prison sentences – A place to belong?

Almost all the participants had received their first prison sentence when they were relatively young, with ages varying from 16 to 28, with 17 and 18 the median ages of first imprisonment. Being sent to prison for the first time was daunting for those who had not already lived in secure accommodation. For those who had already experienced such institutionalisation, going to prison just involved more of the same.

When I first went in I was scared a bit, but see because I had been brought up in care, I was like “I’ll be fine” because it’ll just be like that. Just like a mini-home. (Marie)

Most of the others' expectations had been informed by TV, film or stories they had heard about prison. This meant that when they first faced the prospect of prison, whether on remand or as a sentenced prisoner, they described real fear. These horror stories took very similar forms for male and female participants, with the threat of rape being particularly salient. However, once participants entered the prison, they found it better than expected.

I was just initially scared of the stories about all the big lesbians up there and this and that, it's all the crazy stories you hear, so I was like pure [gasps] scared . . . it's like you're scared tae go tae prison, but once you're there, it's like "This isnae as bad as what I thought", d'you know what I mean? Sortae make the most ae it. (Angela)

Obviously you hear the stories about guys getting raped and things like that, I was scared thinking that was gonnae happen tae me. Erm . . . but you come in and none ae that happens. It's no' the same as what it used tae be back in the 80's and that. Aye, I thought it was actually quite easy the first time I came in. (Michael)

This does not seem to have changed over the years; prison being less scary in reality than in first-timer's imagination has also been noted in the most recent Polmont Young Offender Institution inspection report (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland, 2019). In the interviews, negative expectations of prison only figured in participant narratives as a backdrop to positive experiences when first entering prison. This perspective was reserved for those whose first sentence had been relatively short (i.e. counted in weeks or months, not years) and under more or less modern regimes (i.e. no physical punishment as part of the regime, some level of comfort). Importantly, however, it was also connected to a feeling of belonging. While some participants mentioned some short-lived attempts at bullying or intimidation by other prisoners, many of the participants found a kind of community in prison.

I bounced in . . . bounced about like a Y[oung] O[ffender], *took tae it like a duck to water*. Bad. Didnae bother me at all. And it's got tae the point now where if I'm outside, *I don't feel that I belong anywhere, but I feel like I belong here*. (Eve, emphasis added)

it was all my type of people though, ken . . . Like I was saying, kids wi' a good background and all that, if you brought them intae this, it would maybe give them a shock, but when it's the type of people that you kick about with on the ootside, erm . . . they're all from a different area, but they're the same type of people as you, you're gonnae get along, really. Know what I mean? [inaudible] it's no' a surprise that you end up coming back. (Peter)

It was strange, it was like the toon centre, when you walk intae ma toon everybody knows you, so you cannae get to the other end, it takes ages fae talking to everybody and that's what it's like when you walk intae the hall. Obviously you're a bit scared and that, but then you go intae A hall, everyone was like "Aw, wee Billy!" because I was only a wee guy and they bought me everything fae the shop and kinda looked after us. (Bill)

While Eve's sense of taking to prison 'like a duck to water' locates the feeling of belonging in herself, Peter and Bill both make reference to their fellow prisoners and feeling known, either because of having existing relationships with other prisoners or because of similar backgrounds. This ties in with the importance of cultural factors in creating a sense of belonging (Antonsich, 2010). Such factors include using the same signifiers as others, and some of the shared language among prisoners used above, such as 'bounced about', is therefore a good expression as well as a partial explanation for the sense of belonging Eve describes. This reflects the psychological

theorisation of belonging as consisting of fitting in through shared characteristics (as well as feeling valued) (Hagerty et al., 1996). Indeed, those who for some reason stood out among their fellow prisoners, and therefore didn't feel they belonged, at least at first, experienced their sentences as much more difficult:

I was the only person on my landing that was English, and I think I was the only one that wasn't a junkie. So it was just like . . . "Pfff, is this place for real?" I felt scared, intimidated . . . I used to hate going to bed . . . waking up knowing that I had to go to bed the next day in that place, it was horrible. But now, the only thing that bothers me is you're just locked up. Now, it's so easy, it's like when you go in *it's like a big reunion*, know what I mean? It's stupid, but that's the way it is. (Parker, emphasis added)

For their first sentence especially, but throughout my interviewees' penal careers, much of the experience, and therefore meaning, of imprisonment was defined by other prisoners, something that has not been well addressed in the literature since the classic prison sociologies of Clemner and Sykes. More current studies of experiences of imprisonment tend to focus on individual adaptation and prison conditions, with some arguing that forming a prisoner society is more difficult now than in the past (Crewe, 2011). For the *Lives Sentenced* participants, being similar led to a sense of belonging and thereby to 'easy' sentences, while being dissimilar made things more difficult. The last parts of Eve and Parker's quotes also demonstrate that sentences are not considered in isolation. Instead, their experience of prison is ongoing, with early experiences inevitably linked to later ones.

Harsher prison conditions and longer first sentences were generally not described in terms of belonging. As noted above, those whose penal careers went back further tended to describe harsh regimes, with physical drills as the main activity and/or very basic conditions (the absence of a toilet and scratchy blankets were often mentioned). In these accounts, other prisoners did not figure as prominently. Equally, when the first sentence was long, this was a very difficult experience.

I got 8 years . . . Thought I'd never see the end of it . . . maybe it was just me, but I think everybody getting a sentence like that for the first time, suicide will cross their mind. I would never do it but at the time, you're only a young boy, you're getting a sentence like that, all sorts of things you think, you'll never see the end of it, but it went quite fast. (Dan)

Other negative experiences were related to drugs and alcohol withdrawal while in prison for the first time, but on the whole, people adapted quickly to their sentence, including long-term sentences, as also demonstrated by the final words in the quote by Dan above (see also Schinkel, 2014a). Even the most difficult conditions were not experienced as effective deterrents, as participants tended to feel afterwards that, given that such conditions had not broken them, the justice system had nothing left in its arsenal to scare them with.

The meaning of accumulating sentences – Complexity, normality and displacement

Participants did not experience each sentence as a separate and distinct instance of punishment, and this is reflected in how they ascribed meaning to accumulating sentences. This was especially true in the middle of people's penal careers, when sentences were often coming in thick and fast. It was clear from participants' accounts that at times they could not keep track of all their sentences and did not distinguish between imprisonment on remand and under sentence.³ Escaping from the

multiple layers of interacting future and present sentences was seen as all but impossible. For example, new sentences could mean a breach of an existing community order, periods of remand could lead to a return to drugs in prison and thereby a return to offending once released after a 'not guilty' verdict. Instead of evaluating sentences or remands as such, both were experienced as yet another period of time in prison. This in itself illustrates the absence of meaning drawn from the sentencing process and any communication by the judge at that time (Schinkel, 2014b). While participants often did not keep track of all their sentences throughout their lives, during each period of imprisonment, they focused on their earliest date of release, meaning that overlapping sentences and/or remands were experienced as one period of time in prison.

The main meaning of the accumulation of sentences experienced by the men and women interviewed for this research has already been foreshadowed in Eve's and Parker's quotes in the previous section, where they described an increased sense of belonging in the prison rather than outside. This was in part due to the relationships they formed within prison, the place where they had usually spent most of their adulthood. Dan, who had perhaps spent the most time in prison of all the interviewees, reflected:

I know people fae everywhere, doesnae matter where I go. I've been up in Aberdeen High Court and you bump intae people, in Edinburgh you bump intae people, Glasgow, you bump intae . . . doesnae matter where I go . . . a lot of it because of the jails.

With his one surviving immediate family member, his brother, in another prison on a life sentence, Dan no longer had friends, close family or even many acquaintances who had not been in prison. This meant that even when not in prison, Dan was surrounded by ex-prisoners, many of whom also returned to prison frequently. This had consequences for the way he was policed and hindered any moves he made towards desistance (see Schinkel et al., 2019). It also had an impact on where he felt he belonged.

While most participants had some connection with people outside, these relationships were interrupted by imprisonment, often with negative consequences.

Prison eh, breaks up your relationships, your family contact and everything. It breaks everything up. . . . They always say in prison they're trying to help tae, wae relationships, but it breaks the relationship. (Sean)

Prison alters both the time and effort required to maintain connections to the 'alliances' (friends, families and other groups) (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013) that help to foster a sense of belonging in a community. Moreover, the fact that their recent autobiographical experiences (Antonsich, 2010) had mostly taken place in prison meant that they had increasingly less in common with others who did not offend. Brian said:

When I get out, that's all I've got to talk about is being in the jail, because I've been in here for a few year. And then, my girlfriend got sick of me talking about the jail and she didn't understand this is all I've knew for that period of time. And then my pals were like "Fucking stop talking about the jail, fucks sake." Well, what else am I supposed to talk about?

Not sharing common experiences in the community outside meant a disconnection between Brian and his friends who were living their lives (and thereby belonged) outside.

On top of being similar to others in prison in the first place and sharing cultural understandings, as described above, the quotes by Dan, Sean and Brian above illustrate how people become simultaneously more embedded in prison and increasingly displaced from the outside. This was not only true for relationships, although the interruption and loss of these was the most painful, but also in terms of material belonging (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto, 2019; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Many participants had lost houses and belongings repeatedly due to being imprisoned.

Lost that hoose, then. Had a few, see, fae the council, but I lose them every time I get the jail. So I always end up back tae square one when I get oot. It's just a vicious circle, wi' homeless and all that. I hate it. (Eilidh)

While losing homes is perhaps the most painful form of loss of material belonging, participants also commented on the relevance of clothes and other items. The relevance of possessions was also noted within the prison environment, where participants used them to try to make their cell as much like a home as possible.

Just make ma cell nice (LAUGHS) . . . just make the cell intae a nice wee room. Posters. (PAUSE) Different towels a' ower the place an' that, just make it a wee bit mair homely. (Brian)

It is worth reflecting here on the way in which prison, as a 'total institution' (Goffman, 1961), reduces its inmates' identities to only one role, which restricts their ability to exercise their belonging to 'different social constellations' (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013: 21). For example, Cairnie was grateful to his stepfather for collecting his children from school and looking after them when he was imprisoned and could not do this himself, but also felt more and more displaced from his fatherhood role each time he went to prison.

Moreover, repeatedly being in prison created a further alienation from life outside through institutionalisation, which I will skim over here given its extensive discussion elsewhere (Goffman, 1961; Haney, 2003; Martin, 2018; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Many participants noted that the accumulated time they had spent in prison meant that they found imprisonment easier than being outside. Cairnie described how his adaptation to prison conditions shaped his sense of belonging.

I've purposefully done stuff to get in here. I'm not good at dealing with stress, eh? I just could not adapt. Could not handle just sitting in the house and not having a white shirt [prison officer] in the house . . . I was just that institutionalised, eh? I just didn't feel like I was meant to be there, *just didn't belong* there, eh? So I thought "I'm better off back in here." (Cairnie, emphasis added)

Increasingly, in other words, Cairnie found the prison environment easier to navigate than life outside. Cairnie highlights his own institutionalisation but links his missing of the 'white shirts' also to a feeling of not belonging in the house outside, implying a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991; see also safety in Antonsich, 2010) stemming from their presence. Others commented on how the predictability of life in prison felt safer than the unpredictability of life outside. This sense of prison life 'being easier' and safer, when added to a sense of not belonging outside, was a significant factor in determining the meaning of the accumulation of sentences.

Through repeated experiences of imprisonment, the state of being imprisoned was increasingly normalised. This was perhaps most vividly expressed by one participant describing his upcoming release as ‘a holiday’, an idiom which he shared with his fellow prisoners:

You look at it as “I’m getting out for a holiday”. You’re getting out for a holiday, you’re going out to binge drink, take drugs, then coming back. You’re on holiday. That’s what it feels like. It’s crazy to understand that, but that’s exactly how it feels. Like you’re getting out for a holiday. (Tyler)

The notion of a holiday implies that life in prison is ‘real life’ and where one belongs, just like others see their lives at home as ‘real’, and holidays as a temporary escape. If being outside is ‘a holiday’, this automatically means it is temporary – seeing release in these terms precludes expectations of change. Whether the outside was positioned in Tyler’s terms as a respite from prison, or the prison as a respite from life outside, as by Cairnie, the normalisation of imprisonment allowed new meanings to emerge; meanings singularly unconnected to crime and punishment. In some cases, this meant seeking a sentence; prison was fairly commonly used by the participants as a resource for drug rehabilitation or housing.

For about 10, maybe 12 years I would say that I was going in and out of [prison], because it went full circle. It went fae no wanting tae go intae [prison] . . . tae that being the better option. I was like that tae maself: “Why sleep on the streets when I can get a bed and all that in there?” (Jim)

If these resources had been readily available in the community, it is unlikely that these participants would have been imprisoned, whether completely on purpose, through offending less carefully or by asking for imprisonment in the court. Except for short remands, Jim was not imprisoned again once he was given suitable accommodation.

A second fairly common (absence of) meaning was where imprisonment followed a chain of events that were themselves traumatic and meaningful (Segrave & Carlton, 2010) and led to prison in their aftermath. For example, Diane’s daughter had been taken into care against her wishes. When Diane found out there was very little hope she’d ever regain custody of her child, she ‘went off the rails’:

They [social services] knew I would. They knew if they told me there was no hope, what was the point for me? There was no point, that was the only reason I stayed clean, was for her. I went “You know what, fuck the lot ae ye’s.” And that was when I went clean off the rails, I really started dealing quite badly, I was on the drugs all day, all night, didnae care, stopped going tae see the bairn . . . then got the jail.

For participants such as Diane, any questions about the meaning of the sentence(s) that followed traumatic life events made little sense to the participants. Imprisonment was merely the aftermath of a return to drug or alcohol use in response to the trauma they had experienced.

While seeing prison as a resource or the aftermath of something more meaningful were common, more idiosyncratic meanings were also made possible by the normalisation of imprisonment. Two of the male participants described using their experience of imprisonment as a kind of capital, having volunteered to ‘take a sentence’ for an offence that someone else had committed, usually a woman. This was either to protect the real offender or to clear a form of moral debt. Bruce

described how he had taken ‘the rap for two lassies before, because I owed someone a favour’. Dan recounted volunteering to serve several sentences, motivated by a kind of chivalry.

She gave her some leathering, but yet again, I says it was me, even though it was the lassie, I just couldn’t see a lassie going to jail. (Dan)

For two female participants who had previously been in a relationship, seeking a sentence when the other was imprisoned had been a strategy to be together in prison, where they often shared a cell, rather than forced apart.

That’s what we’d usually do. If she was daeing a bigger sentence than me, I would just go oot and dae something just tae come back in, eh. We’d dae that all the time, because we didnae care, we didnae care and *there was nothing oot there for us*. (Connie, emphasis added).

This quote makes it especially clear how the sense of not belonging in the community (where there’s nothing for us) facilitated new meanings of imprisonment, such as a place to be together for these two women. Imprisonment together is preferable (‘we didnae care’) to being lonely outside, with ‘nothing oot there for us’.

However, none of these examples mean that an increasing sense of belonging in prison rather than the outside world makes further repeated imprisonment inevitable. Many of the participants, perhaps surprisingly for those categorised as persistent offenders, described periods of relative stability in their lives, during which they were either not offending or offending less seriously and stayed out of prison. Importantly, though, this was usually associated with having some sort of stake in the outside world, whether a child (Schinkel, 2019), a form of (often illicit) employment, a relative to care for or a new partner. Any sentences following such periods felt more painful and therefore more meaningful than others – what was built up outside was missed and feelings of guilt proliferated, especially in relation to children.

I had nothing tae worry aboot ootside. I was always happy, fucking jumping aboot, when I was a Y[oung] O[ffender]. Now I’ve got S [daughter], oh my God. Like this sentence has really been hard. Like ‘cos they’re trying tae take her aff me altogether and I’m not allowed to see her. (Shelby)

Importantly, though, even under such circumstances, this did not make the punitive intent of the sentence more salient. Participants rarely reflected on the meaning of their sentence in relation to their offending, unless they felt the sentence was unfair. Even then, protest tended to focus on technicalities of the police or court process, rather than on whether the punishment fitted the crime. As with long-term prisoners (Schinkel, 2014a), the demands of adaptation to imprisonment meant that questions of fairness tended to be muted. Nevertheless, participants were often critical of the implementation of imprisonment, especially the lack of rehabilitation. It was the fact that prison did not work, rather than that it was unfair in relation to what they had done, that was the focal point of discussion:

I think I’ve deserved tae come tae jail, aye. I dinnae think . . . you can only give a person the same punishment so many times before you have tae say “Right, well we need tae dae something different.” And I know then that comes in saying “Well you’ve had jail so many times, so what then is the alternative tae that?” But there isnae really. (Peter)

This comment on the repeated failure of short-term imprisonment to have any positive effect is a powerful critique of the rhetoric of judges often reported in Scotland that imprisonment is a measure of last resort (Tata, 2019). As Tata has noted, while community sentences have to prove themselves to be effective, prison does not, and while judges stop using alternatives when these are under resourced, prison continues to receive people (Tata, 2019), even if they have to share cells that are not equipped for this. If prison, too, had to prove to be just (due to the seriousness of the offending) and effective in each case, people like Peter would not return again and again.

Not a place to belong – A waste of life

Despite the overlaps described between people's experiences of imprisonment and belonging as set out in the geography literature, there are also many ways in which prison fell short as a place to belong. Antonsich (2010) writes that relationships have to be stable, positive and caring as well as sufficiently numerous to create a sense of belonging in a place. While many prisoners mentioned seeing 'all the same faces' in prison, and some described forging meaningful friendships, at the same time these relationships were persistently interrupted or ended due to the nature of short-term imprisonment, just like the ones outside.

You meet some nice people in here, some really nice genuine pals and that, eh like. And there's so many people that I've met . . . and then they've just got oot. So like you're getting close to people and then like they're getting oot. It's happened quite a lot, eh, so that's shite. That's shit tae, for me, ken, cause you're like (sighs). (Connie)

Furthermore, few of the positive belonging-enhancing activities such as being welcomed, cooking and sharing food (Curtis and Mee, 2012) are present in prison, nor is there a normal accumulation of memories, given that each day in prison is much the same. However, while there is no welcoming into prison, there is also no warm welcome to the outside for those perceived as 'beyond the pale' or 'incurable' (Tombs and Jagger, 2006) either. Imprisonment itself is among the strongest expressions that you do *not* belong in the community (Duff, 2001; Schinkel, 2014b). The participants reflected on this indirectly in terms of the impact of their criminal record in their interactions with the police (Schinkel et al., 2019) and the courts.

After a while, the judges, you cannae do anything but you're back in prison. Because of your past and . . . even though now mines are no' drug related, because of my past, I'm still jailed, jailed, jailed. (Alex)

While the participants did not reflect explicitly on the disenfranchisement that comes with prison, or other ways in which their citizenship was affected, the affective dimension of belonging to a valued group was missing. Pfaff-Czernicka (2013: 13) makes the distinction between belonging to (*Zugehörigkeit*) and belonging *together* (*Zusammengehörigkeit*). While prisoners felt they belonged in terms of the characteristics they shared with other prisoners, there was no sense of being part of a valued group, with clear boundaries and a common cause. Since judges control who enters and leaves, and the prison walls define membership, prison was not a place where the participants would *choose* to belong, even if they sometimes chose to return there.

Most importantly, looking back, older participants realised that being in prison meant they had missed out on life itself. While each sentence in itself tended to either be meaningless or even something wished for, the accumulation of sentences meant that people had become displaced

from their lives and wasted time in prison, instead of building a life for themselves outside. Many expressed acute regret at this.

What a waste of years. Probably over 20 year . . . wasted in prison, aye. And it's too late tae do this, too late tae do that. You know? Too old tae dae that and too auld tae dae this. (Stuart)

[Repeated short-term sentences] don't deter me, they've not really been important. They've wasted my life, aye, but they've not stopped me from doing it. Because I've had that experience, I know what the jail's like, so I'm not scared to go back. So . . . that's the problem because it's just ruined my whole life, I've wasted my whole life in these places. (Dan)

This might be one of the reasons for the increasing anger Armstrong and Weaver (2013) found among people who had experienced many prison sentences: the lack of efficacy of imprisonment meant that more of life was wasted on prison.

Discussion

Sensitised by Antonisch's (2010) conceptualisation of 'belonging', this life-course analysis of how men and women experience repeat short-term imprisonment across lengthy 'penal careers' has generated key findings of value to both practice and future academic studies.

First of all, it has shown the value of belonging as a lens through which to understand the (changing) experiences of people who are repeatedly sentenced to short-term imprisonment. When first sentenced to prison, belonging was based on similar geographical origins, age, background and existing relationships with other prisoners. Through the accumulation of sentences, a sense of belonging in prison was enhanced (or exacerbated?) by being forced into the prison space with only prisoners and staff for company, displacement from life outside and institutionalisation. An increasing sense of belonging facilitated other meanings of imprisonment, such as prison as a resource or merely the aftermath of another form of trauma.

Secondly, it has highlighted how this sense of 'belonging' within carceral spaces and the erosion of people's (sense of belonging to) life outside presents a significant barrier in terms of long-term desistance. Imprisonment itself cannot provide a turning point, rehabilitation or deterrence, as it is insignificant as a punishment or life event. Individual short sentences meant very little: it was only looking back at persistent imprisonment that its meaning was evaluated negatively as a waste of life.

Thirdly, it has shown the need for the life-course study of penal careers. For those repeatedly punished, penal sanctions are experienced cumulatively rather than in isolation. Looking beyond the confines of each sentence and seeing them as part of a penal career and life allows for a new perspective on the experiences, meanings and impacts of imprisonment.

The experiences described here echo Pat Carlen's (1983) finding in the early 1980s that the meaning of women's imprisonment in Scotland at the time was 'imprisonment denied' (p. 211). Her conclusion was based on the way women were seen by justice system professionals as not 'real women' or 'real prisoners' and the new Cornton Vale as not a 'real prison'. The findings here suggest that prison does not function as a 'real prison' in people's lives, who instead find themselves 'quite horribly at home' there (Chesler 1974, cited in Carlen, 1983: 210). None of the participants *wanted* to be 'horribly at home' in prison, but the accumulation of sentences over time meant that they felt they did, to greater or lesser extents. Antonsich (2010) has described home as a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security and emotional attachment (p. 646). While in the

quotes there are themes of familiarity, and while a return to prison might even be welcomed, participants expressed feelings of comfort or security only in contrast to having to cope with the complexity of life outside. Prison, then, is secure in that it entails a life stripped bare, with few responsibilities left to those who live within it and the unexpected reduced to a minimum.

Research with judges and social workers preparing reports has found that they categorise some of the people they (help) sentence as 'irredeemable' (Carlen, 1983; McNeill et al., 2009; Tombs and Jagger, 2006). The participants in this study keenly felt this condemnation from the police (Schinkel et al., 2019) as well as from social workers and judges.⁴ Rather than committing serious crimes, they were much more likely to be included in the 'irredeemable' category used by judges and social workers because they frequently offended and, significantly, had breached community orders earlier in life. By ascribing permanence to this label of incorrigibility, social workers and judges are ignoring the possibility for change later in life. The resulting punitive responses further undermine the motivation and opportunities for desistance, which are already limited when people feel they belong in prison. Thereby, the current system of continuing to imprison individuals for short custodial periods is complicit in 'wasting life' and contributing to the longevity rather than curtailment of lengthy penal careers. This runs counter to the overall goals of penal institutions and the broader criminal justice system.

Sentencing people to repeated short-term imprisonment is also counter to social justice, as sentencers are holding individuals personally accountable for wider social forces. While this article focuses on the meanings of persistent imprisonment as reflected in individuals' accounts, the findings here are as much influenced by societal arrangements as by individual adaptation. The impact of institutional, structural and symbolic violence (Anderson, in preparation) on people's sense of belonging can be read from most of the quotes contained in the article. Eilidh and Jim's quotes about homelessness, Diane's experience of having her child taken away, Marie's experiences of care and Alex's sense of being sentenced on her record alone all relate to the lack of supportive arrangements in the community. The first quotes reported above, where young people entering prison find a place they belong because it is full of people like them, speaks to the selective criminalisation of people from the most deprived areas. It is deeply troubling (and expensive) for people to feel like they belong in spaces intended for punishment.

Ways forward

There has long been a recognition in Scotland that repeated short sentences do not work and that imprisonment should be reserved for the most serious crimes (Scottish Prisons Commission, 2008). However, a presumption against sentences of less than 3 months adopted in 2011 had little effect on sentencing (Scottish Government, 2015). A further presumption against sentences of less than 12 months came into effect in July 2019, too recently to assess its impact (Scottish Government, 2020). It too, however, relies on sentencers to stop implementing shorter sentences where they previously would have thought them appropriate (the presumption means they can only do so if they feel there is no alternative and requires them to record a reason for doing so). In fact, the most senior judge in Scotland, Lord Carloway, has noted the feeling among sentencers that 'the legislation fails to address the problem of the repeat offender and the recidivist who will not comply with court orders' (Carloway, 2016: 9), making it especially unlikely that the presumption against short sentences will hold for the people whose experiences are described in this article. Instead, Carloway suggests that we need 'to escape from the traditional notion that sentencing involves an ever-increasing level of punishment for repeat offenders' (p. 9). If sentences were not increased for

repeated low-level offences, then many of the participants in this research would never have received a prison sentence.

Another legislative possibility would be to cap the number of times a short-term prison sentence can be imposed. People's circumstances and motivations change. A young person breaching community sentences does not mean he or she is 'irredeemable' (Carlen, 1983; McNeill et al., 2009; Tombs and Jagger, 2006) forever. People should be given 'chances' at community disposals and meaningful support during these at different points in their lives, rather than only at the start of their criminal career. As Peter noted above, there should be an alternative to continued short-term imprisonment.

Beyond such changes in legislation, what can we do to stop people feeling like they belong in prison? One possibility would be to create a greater sense of belonging in the community for people with convictions. Maruna (2017) has argued that desistance needs to become a social movement, similar to recovery movements in relation to mental health and addiction, in which campaigners with criminal convictions challenge the stigma attached to this. Alongside this, it might be possible to create places of belonging in the world outside (Curtis and Mee, 2012; Fortune and Yuen, 2015). Innovative projects that unite the challenging of stigma and providing a place of belonging are springing up. Vox Liminis is a prime example in Scotland: it is a creative project that both aims to communicate with the wider public about criminal justice (including through creative means, like songwriting) and also contains a prefigurative practice element, focused on building community and practising reintegration (Urie et al., 2019). One aspect of the project is a weekly get-together called Unbound, where food, music and life are shared. Unbound aims to be a space where everyone involved belongs, including academics, professional musicians, justice practitioners and people with lived experience of the justice system. Five years of these gatherings suggest that initiatives of this sort can and do help build connection with and for those who have served long prison sentences (Urie et al., 2019). However, experience also suggests that it is more difficult to sustain connections with and for people who are in and out of prison serving short sentences (McNeill, personal communication 14/04/2020).

A radically different approach to imprisonment might also disrupt the stark contrast between prison and the world outside. In Scotland, the Commission on Women Offenders (2012) recommended the use of 'community-facing' units for women, which were subsequently dubbed women's community custody units, run by the Scottish Prison Service. While two of these are in development, so far the main change has been the relocation of women from one central prison to newly created women's wings in pre-existing male prisons that are physically more proximate to, but just as institutionally separate from prisoners' communities. In Belgium, more ambitious plans are being forged, with the organisation De Huizen ('The Houses') advocating for a new approach to make imprisonment suitable for the 21st century. Led by a prison governor, it advocates for units of up to 10 people in adapted existing houses and appropriately varied levels of security instead of large purpose-built prisons, arguing that the architecture of prison in itself positions any prisoner as dangerous and in need of control rather than support (Claus et al., 2013). Each house would contain up to three units and have a community-facing element of benefit to the neighbourhood, like a bike repair shop, an animal shelter or similar. This would mean that people would be held in circumstances much closer both in conditions and in location to the community. Small and distinct units would also make a sense of belonging in prison as an abstract concept less likely, instead instilling some level of belonging to a particular space (the house in question) and maintaining a sense of belonging to the wider community, which the person detained also comes from. Some of the difficulties in keeping people connected to outside life identified in this article will still exist.

Crime will still be socially constructed to focus on the actions of those with the fewest resources and ignore middle-class misdeeds. This means that those who are housed in the Huizen will still have much in common and relationships will still be interrupted. Compared to large prisons, however, the Huizen may be able to mitigate at least the disruption of relationships through people being closer to home and maximising the opportunities for contact with loved ones.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Gareth Mulvey, Sarah Anderson, Fergus McNeill and David Hayes for their comments, which have improved this article no end.

Data Sharing

Data from the research has been deposited with the UK Data Service, SN 852680 and SN 852804.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the ESRC [grant number ES/K009389/1] and Community Justice Scotland.

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Notes

1. Prison sentences of up to 4 years in Scotland.
2. Primary desistance relates to a cessation of offending, secondary desistance to a shift in identity away from someone who offends.
3. The prison computer system used by staff to identify possible participants also seemed not to distinguish between remands and sentences. Several women who were initially recruited had only served one or two sentences but had been on remand many times. Any interviews with these prisoners are not included in the analysis.
4. Which exacerbated their sense of non-belonging in the community.

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